

Chapter 8

Writing Portfolio Assessment: Scoring and Student Performance

The Place of the Writing Portfolio Assessment in the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System

Since 1993, writing portfolios have occupied a key place in Kentucky's assessment programs, both as a means of assessment that directly taps student work in classrooms, and as a means for supporting educational improvement in classrooms, schools, and districts. Since the contents of the portfolios arise from students' classroom work, the portfolio is the assessment component that most clearly reflects local curriculum and instruction. In concept, students develop portfolios over long periods of time—months and perhaps years. Because students have had the opportunity to revise their portfolio entries with support and feedback from teachers and peers, the assessment portfolio may reasonably be viewed as the student's "best work."

In many respects, writing portfolios are the portion of the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System that most directly and comprehensively supports educational reform because of the strong connection to students' classroom experiences and the strong involvement of teachers. For that reason, writing portfolio activities include extensive professional development opportunities which local schools can employ as a powerful means of supporting teachers' professional development and school improvement. A trainer-of-trainers model is employed to deliver scoring training throughout the state. In addition, regional consultants are available to provide professional development and informal teacher support throughout the year.

Local Scoring

All writing portfolios are scored locally to allow each school to observe all of the information included in the portfolios—information that goes well beyond the scoring criteria. Reliance on local scoring requires training and practice as well as alignment between portfolio requirements and local instruction. The portfolio development and scoring process also assumes considerable content knowledge of teachers. Local scoring provides a wholly different model of teacher responsibility and involvement in the accountability system than centrally scored or multiple-choice tests. Although external scoring can provide summary data in the form of scores, for schools not in the audit, local portfolio scoring allows discussion of the best ways to modify instruction based on assessment data that directly reflect classroom practices. For schools in the portfolio audit, and available for other interested schools, guidance is provided by KDE consultants for analyzing the results. Extensive professional development is provided throughout the state to support scoring accuracy and the alignment of instruction with the portfolio assessment criteria.

The writing portfolio assessment is standardized in the following ways.

- **Training:** The Kentucky Department of Education and the scoring contractor, Data Recognition Corporation, provide every school district with complete scoring training materials for each accountability grade, including detailed rules for portfolio preparation to ensure that the work in each portfolio has been completed by the student.
- **Developing:** Portfolio content requirements prescribe the number and types of required entries. Portfolios that are incomplete receive zero points.
- **Scoring:** All assessors use the scoring guide accompanied by several benchmark and high-end portfolios for determining each score point.

Monitoring the System

Portfolio development and scoring are monitored in several ways. Early in the year, an Administration Code is distributed to all schools describing the limits on a teacher's comments or modifications of a student's portfolio entries. When the school assigned portfolio scores are submitted to the Kentucky Department of Education, the principal is required to submit a signed assurance statement confirming that appropriate portfolio development practices were observed. Accusations or complaints of inappropriate practices are investigated by the Kentucky Department of Education and penalties are applied, if warranted. In addition, each student portfolio includes a statement signed by the student attesting that the student completed all portfolio entries. If plagiarism is discovered at local scoring or during an audit, the entry is "removed," making the portfolio incomplete. Incomplete portfolios receive a score of zero.

Due to the public accountability and high stakes associated with the assessment system, the Writing Portfolio Audit is used to monitor portfolio development and scoring. Audits are formal studies of local scoring accuracy. The audit has several purposes:

- to monitor accuracy of scoring throughout the system in order to plan statewide training and allocation of resources;
- to correct inaccurate scores assigned locally; and
- to verify exceptional score gains.

The Kentucky Department of Education defines the sample of schools to be included in the audit in a manner that allows the results to be generalized beyond the group of participating schools. All schools that are selected must participate and are required to submit all portfolios for rescoring. Locally assigned portfolio scores and the resulting Writing Portfolio Indexes are changed as a result of the audit.

After seven years of portfolio assessment, two main issues continue to surround the use of portfolios in Kentucky's assessment system: the level of scoring accuracy achieved by Kentucky teachers and the impact of portfolios on instructional practice. The following sections present the rationale for the design of the writing portfolio assessment, information about the scoring reliability and instructional impact of writing portfolios during the 1998-99 school year,¹ and a discussion of related issues.

Rationale and Design of the Writing Portfolio Assessment

The Kentucky Writing Portfolio assesses student writing directly (at Grades 4, 7, and 12) by examining a collection of a student's written products. The structure of the writing portfolio and the holistic scoring guide encourage teachers to provide instruction focused on teaching students to communicate effectively and to provide grammar, punctuation, and spelling instruction through these authentic writing experiences.

A committee of Kentucky English/Language Arts educators originally designed the portfolio. This committee discussed the traditional writing experience of Kentucky students and found that most instruction had focused on isolated grammar and very confined writing experiences (i.e., reports, essays, research papers). Using the writing Academic Expectation as their guide (that all students should write for multiple purposes in multiple forms for a variety of audiences), the committee structured the contents of the portfolio to include broad categories of writing that consciously excluded reports, academic essays, and research papers. However, those categories will continue to be included in instruction. Instead, the committee created a structure that required the following other types of writing.

- Reflective Writing
- Personal Expressive Writing
- Literary Writing
- Transactive Writing

In addition to this purposeful design of the portfolio contents, the criteria for assessment were selected and scoring tools were designed with these instructional focus changes clearly in mind. While the committee believed that mastery and assessment of mechanics remained critical, they also identified several more critical criteria that had traditionally been less evident in writing instruction and assessment in Kentucky (e.g., focus on real-world purposes and audiences, idea development, and organizational skills).

¹

Information about activities occurring prior to this may be found in the technical report for the corresponding years.

Finally, the committee selected the following six main criteria for assessing the quality of student writing.

- Purpose/Audience Awareness
- Idea Development/Support
- Organization
- Sentence Structure and Variety
- Language (Word Choice and Usage)
- Correctness (Spelling, Punctuation, and Capitalization)

These criteria are analyzed holistically to produce a single final judgment for each complete portfolio. The committee believed that these portfolio content requirements and assessment criteria would provide teachers with guidelines for more balanced writing instruction, consistent with the national movement toward more process-centered instruction.

Professional Development

The Kentucky Writing Program (KWP) supports a wide variety of professional development experiences including portfolio scoring training and workshops and consultation focused primarily on classroom strategies for developing student writing skills. Since the introduction of the writing portfolio assessment, the writing portfolio, a tiered training system has supported classroom teachers. This system relies on a design committee to train local trainers who then deliver portfolio development and scoring strategies to the other teachers in their school. Each year, these local trainers receive two rounds of professional development, one focused on the generation of portfolio entries and one focused on scoring to state standards. These sessions are augmented by print materials, video training provided through state-wide educational television, and local level workshops provided by the writing portfolio regional consultants.

In addition, Regional Writing Consultants work with local districts and schools upon request to provide individually tailored professional development experiences focused on a variety of writing portfolio related topics such as portfolio analysis, technical writing, personal expressive writing, reflective writing, writing across the curriculum, development of writing workshop classrooms, and designing appropriate assignments focused on real-world purposes and audiences.

1999 Writing Portfolio Scoring Audit

The 1999 Writing Portfolio scoring audit was the fifth to be carried out. The first writing portfolio scoring audit was held in 1993 (for details see the Cycle I Technical Report). By legislative directive, the 1993 Writing Audit allowed schools the choice of keeping their original scores or accepting revised scores based on the generally lower audit results. Most schools chose to use the scores that they had assigned to the portfolios to compute their Writing Portfolio Index (WPI).

Beginning in 1996 after two years of analysis of volunteer portfolio audits, audits were conducted to monitor statewide scoring patterns and to adjust scores for those schools found to be scoring portfolios inaccurately. The audit results were reported to individual schools and were used to adjust the Writing Portfolio Index of all audited schools. Overall, the audits have validated the accuracy of local scoring.

The 1999 audit was carried out by Data Recognition Corporation and monitored by the Kentucky Department of Education. A small proportion of the audit portfolios were rescored by experienced Kentucky teachers to ensure that Data Recognition Corporation had applied the scoring standards correctly. Audit scorers were trained in the use of the Kentucky Scoring Guide, required to qualify by scoring a set of portfolios to a predetermined level of accuracy, and monitored continuously for scoring accuracy. Any audit scorer who failed to maintain the required level of scoring accuracy was discharged.

One hundred and six schools were selected for auditing. Fifty-six, designated as the Random Schools, were selected at random, providing a sample of schools from which to infer statewide scoring accuracy rates. The remaining fifty, referred to as the Purposeful Schools, were chosen using a formula that identified schools with writing portfolio scores that were very high or very low relative to test scores in other content areas.

The results of the 1999 audit are summarized in Table 8.1. Two measures of scoring accuracy are presented, the exact agreement between the portfolio scores assigned by the school and those assigned by the audit, and the magnitude of the difference in the Writing Portfolio Index, a scale of 0 to 140 points. The Writing Portfolio Index is determined by assigning a score of 0 for all portfolios scored “Blank,” and “Incomplete.” Values of 13, 60, 100, and 140 points are assigned to portfolios rated as Novice, Apprentice, Proficient or Distinguished, respectively. The Writing Portfolio Index is then computed as the arithmetic mean of all portfolio scores. Note that because the values of Novice and Apprentice portfolios were raised beginning with Cycle 4, the data presented below cannot be directly compared with the results of previous audits.

The purposeful group exhibited lower exact agreement with the audit scores; 74.90% of their portfolio scores were confirmed by one or more audit readers. For the Random group, 76.37% of the locally assigned scores were confirmed. Across schools, the mean change in the Writing Portfolio Index was slightly over one and a half times smaller for the Purposeful group than for the Random group. The audit adjusted the Writing Portfolio Index for the Purposeful group downward by nearly four points, while the change for the Random schools was a reduction of slightly less than six points on the 140 point Writing Portfolio Index

TABLE 8.1
SUMMARY OF 1999 AUDIT RESULTS

	PURPOSEFUL SCHOOLS			RANDOM SCHOOL		
	ORIGINAL-AUDIT SCORE AGREEMENT	ORIGINAL WPI	AUDITED WPI (DIFFERENCE)	ORIGINAL-AUDIT SCORE AGREEMENT	ORIGINAL WPI	AUDITED WPI (DIFFERENCE)
GRADE 4	77.80%	70.89	71.59 (+.07)	77.84%	58.35	57.50 (-.85)
GRADE 7	70.65%	52.54	40.65 (-11.89)	78.13%	35.13	28.10 (-7.03)
GRADE 12	48.14% ²	70.72	47.30 (-23.42)	71.97%	60.67	50.06 (-10.61)
TOTAL SCHOOLS	74.90%	64.76	60.87 (-3.89)	76.37%	49.83	43.90 (-5.93)

Together, these two pieces of information, the Writing Portfolio Index changes and the percents of exact agreement, validate the use of local scoring of writing portfolios by verifying the accuracy of local scoring.

It is important to note that scoring accuracy was not uniform across schools. Seventy-eight of the one hundred and six audited schools in 1999 demonstrated a seventy percent or greater rate of scoring agreement with audited scores. Table 8.2 shows the variety of scoring accuracy found among audited schools.

TABLE 8.2
LEVELS OF EXACT AGREEMENT

PERCENTAGE OF EXACT AGREEMENT	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS
90%	4
80-89%	41
70-79%	33
60-69%	16
50-59%	7
Less than 49%	5

² In 1999, only one grade 12 school was purposefully selected for the audit.

Selected Reports on Writing Portfolios Available from the Kentucky Department of Education

- 1992-1993 Writing Portfolio Rescoring Report
- 1993-94 Writing Portfolio Scoring Analysis Report
- 1994-95 Writing Portfolio Scoring Analysis Report
- 1995-96 Writing Portfolio Audit Final Report

Portfolio Issues Summary

When viewed across the years, the data present an interesting pattern in scoring which might be summarized as, “Instruction Makes perfect.” Teachers in the accountability grades score many writing portfolios each year and their agreement with external scorers is generally greater than seventy percent. In addition, they are faced every year with the challenge of shaping their instruction to align with portfolio scoring criteria.

Locally-assigned scores are consistently most accurate at the performance levels that occur most frequently. As one observer noted, “After you have scored 300 Novice portfolios, you have an idea of where Novice begins and ends. And after reading 300 Apprentice portfolios, you have an idea of what they look like. But probably no one [local scoring team] in the state has yet scored 300 Proficient portfolios. It’s really not surprising that accuracy is a little lower there.” The implications for ongoing scoring training are clear. Portfolio scorers need many opportunities to read and score portfolios, particularly portfolios at performance levels beyond those encountered in their school or classroom. Despite the difficulties of locating large numbers of Proficient and Distinguished portfolios, the Kentucky Department of Education must find and distribute more examples of student work at these performance levels.